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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000185

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SUBJECT: THE NORTH KOREA-THAILAND REFUGEE PIPELINE: A TALE OF TWO PROVINCES

REF: 07 CHIANG MAI 151 (NEW ARRIVALS OUTSTRIP RESETTLEMENT)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary and Comment

¶1. (C) The number of North Koreans seeking resettlement to a third country via Thailand is expected to continue to rise, despite a drop in the number of North Koreans arrested in early 2008, according to officials in Chiang Rai Province, which borders both Laos and Burma. Though these same interlocutors spoke of a shift from Chiang Rai to the northeastern Nong Khai Province as the main route of entry into Thailand, our visit to Nong Khai did not uncover information about any such significant migratory movement. The Chiang Rai authorities outlined steps they have undertaken to deal with the situation, such as cross-border intelligence sharing, as well as problems they face, including significant language barriers. They allowed us to view the Provincial Immigration Detention Center (IDC), where overcrowding appears not to be an issue at this time.

¶2. (C) Comment: While the Chiang Rai officials were forthcoming with information, their Nong Khai counterparts were anything but. We suspect that there are more North Korean asylum seekers entering Nong Khai than the provincial authorities told us, but are not in a position to speculate on numbers. The improvements in crowding at the Chiang Rai IDC are likely due more to efforts on the part of the South Korean Government to take in greater numbers of Northern defectors, rather than to steps actively taken by Chiang Rai provincial authorities. End Summary and Comment.

Numbers up in Chiang Rai

¶3. (C) The number of North Korean asylum seekers passing through Thailand on their way to a third country will continue to rise as it did from 2005-07, according to police and immigration officials in the northern Thai province of Chiang Rai, which borders both Laos and Burma. In 2005-2007, provincial authorities told us they detained 190, 542, and 924 North Koreans respectively for illegal entry. In 2008, however, a significant drop appears to be in the offing; as of the end of

May, the corresponding figure was just 167. Our interlocutors viewed this as a temporary aberration, and opined that the numbers would again rise after the 2008 Olympic Games.

14. (C) Our interlocutors attributed the current drop to several factors, including: cross-border cooperation; intelligence; and Chinese policy. They reported very good cooperation with their Lao counterparts, with whom they jointly watch the Mekong River connecting Laos to Chiang Rai for illegal aliens, but less effective cooperation with their Burmese counterparts. A nearly common language, will to work together, and the longevity of postings for relevant Lao officials contribute to this cooperative relationship, they said. The Burmese, on the other hand, have too many officials from different branches of government in the border area who often rotate, are not willing to share intelligence, and do not speak the same language, they lamented.

15. (C) For its part, Chinese policy also has an influence over the number of North Koreans entering Thailand, our interlocutors asserted. When Chinese authorities crack down on illegal aliens already living in China, more attempt to flee, while when they exercise tighter controls over their borders, as they did in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic Games, entry and egress become more difficult, consequently reducing the number fleeing to neighboring countries. Labor conditions in China also play a role, they asserted. When factories that employ North Korean workers face financial problems and lay them off or fire them, the number seeking resettlement rises.

Their Road to Thailand

16. (C) Our Chiang Rai contacts told us most North Koreans enter the province via boat from Laos, which they travel to after spending at least five to seven years working in China. Men

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work mainly as manual laborers, and women mainly in restaurants, they said. Some of the women even marry Chinese husbands to make their lives in China easier, they alleged, only to leave them behind when they flee to Thailand. The cost of the journey to Thailand can be as high as \$5,700, with the smugglers paid in one of several ways: via garnishment of the wages earned by the North Koreans in China; through a relative in South Korea; or via relatives in the planned eventual country of resettlement.

17. (C) Most used to come directly from North Korea to Thailand, our contacts revealed, in a journey lasting about 10 days, mainly on passenger and cargo boats. Since late 2007, a route that appears to be increasing in popularity is to enter Thailand via speed boat down the Mekong from the Chinese city of Guanloei. Those who enter Thailand via the Mekong River from Laos now tend to travel in bigger groups than before, according to our contacts, though they did not speculate on the reasons for this change. If Thai authorities are able to intercept boats before they reach Thailand, they will divert them to the suspected country of origin, be it Laos or Burma.

18. (C) When detained, the North Koreans are generally without documents, according to police and immigration officials. They also appear to have been well-prepared for interrogation, revealing little if anything about who assisted them. Provincial authorities believe their migration to Thailand is organized, but have so far been unable to prove this. Volunteer interpreters the police have to rely on may not be providing accurate translation, they opined, contributing to their inability to find out about the involvement of alien smugglers and human traffickers. On the other hand, the detainees always seem to provide sufficient information for the Thai legal proceedings that eventually result in the North Koreans' resettlement to a third country. We attempted to get the perspective of a South Korean who runs a safe house for North Koreans in Chiang Rai, but we were unable to meet since he had been deported to South Korea. He subsequently reentered

Thailand, but was again deported in November, and we were unable to meet him during his latest stay here.

The IDC on the Up

¶9. (C) Once detained, most North Koreans are taken to the Immigration Detention Center (IDC) in Chiang Rai's Mae Sai District, which borders Burma. Typically, they spend a month there before being transferred to the Bangkok IDC, where they wait until they are fined and "deported" (in reality resettled) to the ROK - or to the U.S. via a transit stop in Seoul. Immigration officials were prepared to let us enter the IDC, but we politely declined, not wishing to raise hopes of immediate resettlement by our presence.

¶10. (C) We chose instead to view the IDC over a closed circuit video link. The facility, which the officials told us measures approximately 720 square feet, can accommodate up to 80 detainees. At the time of our visit to Chiang Rai, 41 North Koreans were being housed there -- 36 women and five men. The facility appeared to be clean, though the detainees were clearly not elated to be there. Immigration officials attributed the lack of overcrowding to steps taken by the South Korean Government to dramatically increase the number of North Koreans it resettled in 2007.

The Path Less Traveled?

¶11. (C) After hearing from several sources, including Chiang Rai provincial officials, that North Koreans had begun entering Thailand via the northeastern province of Nong Khai, choosing it over Chiang Rai because of stricter controls in the latter province, we traveled to Nong Khai to see what we could find out. So far, limited statistics our interlocutors there shared with us do not indicate a shift in the North Koreans' migratory patterns.

¶12. (C) The Provincial Governor, police and immigration officials were all tight-lipped, denying that any significant number of North Koreans was passing through the province. Immigration officials did tell us that the Nong Khai IDC was over capacity, but asserted emphatically that all the occupants were Lao Hmong. Police officials were the most forthcoming, admitting to detaining 18 North Koreans between 2005-8, but they

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claimed to have no other information about North Koreans' movements in the area. We will follow up periodically with the DEA Office in the neighboring province of Udonthani, to see if officers there who agreed to assist us in gathering information about North Koreans' movements through their Thai counternarcotics contacts, are able to do so.

¶13. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.

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